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“Danced through its seven phases”: Samuel Beckett, Symbolism, and Stage Choreographies

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Allusions to dance are rife in Beckett's work, and the early development of his choreographic imagination owes much to late nineteenth-century Symbolist appreciations of dance. Symbolism's aesthetic outlook was crucially shaped by the choreographic proclivities of its key practitioners: a group that included Stéphane Mallarmé, W. B. Yeats, and Maurice Maeterlinck. In his Divagations (1897), Mallarmé declared that both ballet and modern dance perfectly modelled the union of content and form that Symbolist poetics sought to achieve. Early Beckett texts including "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce" (1929) and Dream of Fair to Middling Women (1932) reveal his interest in the forms of "corporeal writing" described by Mallarmé, while also reimagining the index of Symbolist dance imagery in relation to the techniques practised by dancers he knew, including Peggy Sinclair and Lucia Joyce. These forms are condensed and developed in the late work Quad I + II (1981): an abstract play for four dancers.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett / dance / symbolism / Stéphane Mallarmé / modernism

Dance has long provided a useful framework for understanding the strict demands of Samuel Beckett's texts. Lucky's contorted dance in *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is just the first of many peculiar choreographic acts on the Beckettian stage, and comparable dance-like motions are to be found across Beckett's corpus; in disordered and unruly kinds of movement, as well as carefully choreographed routines. Ordering Lucky to dance, Pozzo explains to Vladimir and Estragon that he "used to dance the farandole, the fling, the brawl, the jig, the fandango, and even the hornpipe" but now "the best he can do" is a choreography of entrapment; "he thinks he's entangled in a net" (CDW 39). Beholding Lucky's painful, constricted steps, Vladimir, "squirming like an aesthete," muses elliptically, "there's something about it..." (39). While audiences might be focused on the spectacle of Lucky's dance, Beckett's choice of simile in the stage directions draws attention to the quality of Vladimir's actions as he observes the performance: the term "aesthete," here denoting a particular aesthetic sensitivity to dance, points towards the group of late nineteenth-century aestheticians who penned rapturous celebrations of choreographic performance, theorizing it as a complete art form. Vladimir's kinaesthetic experience, stimulated by Lucky's movements, results in the sort of tremulous quiver one might expect of a susceptible aesthete like Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, or perhaps the languid art collector Des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (*Against Nature*, 1884). Initiating such a comparison, Beckett's stage direction signals a playful, somewhat unexpected symmetry between Lucky's abject choreography and a rich Symbolist tradition of dance writing.

Although the Symbolist roots of Beckett's interest in dance have been largely overlooked, other scholars have observed the broader connections between Beckett's work and choreographed performance. Positioning Beckett's theatre within a longer genealogy of choreographic modernisms in her study *Literature, Modernism and Dance*, Susan Jones crucially maps the synthesis between these arts back through the late nineteenth century, exploring the poetry of Mallarmé and Yeats in conjunction with Nietzsche's theory of Dionysian and Apollonian forces, as well as developments in modern dance and ballet. Jones persuasively

demonstrates Beckett's "unique experimentation with the relationship between literary and choreographic disciplines" (306), tracing his creative debts to the ballet *Petrouchka* and the dance experiments of Bauhaus director Oskar Schlemmer. Individual Beckett texts also appear to lend themselves to choreographic delineation: Jonathan Kalb perceives the "danced abstraction" (42) of Clov's shuffling movements in *Endgame* (1957), while Ulrika Maude highlights *Quad I + II*s (1981) "eerie rhythmic choreography" (83), stressing the importance of motility to Beckett's entire canon. Movement, for Beckett, is not merely a trope or a convenient mode of signification, Maude argues, but another form of language: one that insists upon the importance of the material and the corporeal. While essays such as "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce" (1929) suggest that Beckett formed a conceptual engagement with dance through the rhythmic, sensory appeal of Joycean language, this is a fascination that deepened in his work for the theatre, a corpus that became increasingly choreographic as his dramatic vision matured.

Beckett's choreographic imagination can be explored productively in light of nineteenth-century Symbolist theories of dance, which shaped subsequent attempts by authors to incorporate the forms and techniques of dance into their literary work. For Mallarmé, Yeats, and other writers immersed in fin-de-siècle performance cultures, dance functioned as a perfect mode of expression, uniting content and form in the graceful motions of the human body. Closely allied with the related school of Decadence, Symbolist writers sought modes of expression for a higher Ideal, attempting to convey the inner truths of the material world through an often dense and portentously symbolic idiom. While he shared Symbolism's interest in synaesthesia and the sensory life of the body, Beckett was less invested in the "opaque materiality" of language, Yoshiki Tajiri explains, than he was in its capacity for "silence" (183), which he paradoxically found in music and dance. Moreover, although Beckett did not especially sympathise with Symbolism's commitment to unveiling an ineffable Ideal, he too was both stimulated and exasperated by the question of how to account for the human element in stage performance, and it was to dance that he also turned as his drama became increasingly minimalist, focused on drastically reduced gestures and forms of mime. He was pre-empted in this regard by the Symbolists, or, as Daniel Albright puts it: "Much in the symbolist theatre anticipates Beckett, who remains [...] a symbolist without symbols" (60). While Beckett is frequently characterized as the gatekeeper of a late modernism, Symbolist dance theories provide an important precedent for his idiosyncratic approach to the concept of movement.

In this article, I situate Beckett within the intellectual history concentrated around this late nineteenth-century coterie, arguing that his use of dance shared Symbolism's approach to choreographic movement as a model for literary praxis. Explicating the connections between Mallarmé's concept of corporeal writing and Beckett's interest in the physical dimensions of prose, I explore references to dance in Beckett's early criticism and in his first novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written 1932; published 1992), showing how his early texts were imaginatively indebted to Symbolism, and shaped by his encounters with real dancers in the 1920s and 30s. Beckett's adoption of choreographic imagery and registers of movement in his work can be illuminated by considering his engagement with Symbolist models of performance, which he also discovered in Yeats's choreographically experimental productions at the Abbey Theatre, and the Belgian dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck's theories of acting. The portraits of dancers that recur across the works of these authors testify to a pervasive fixation with the body-

in-movement, a body that is, at times, rigidly constrained by external directions, yet elsewhere performs freely, spontaneously, even wildly. Mallarmé's favorite dancer, Loïe Fuller, orchestrated veiled dances that made her body a crucial vanishing point at the center of her billowing silks, playing with her synthetically expansive corporeality to create a perfectly concise dance of writing. Such a dance of veils certainly satisfied Symbolism's preference for the oblique, stylistically realised in the metaphorical tapestries of gauzes, masks, and mirrors that proliferate in writing of this period. However, as we shall see, Beckett too reconstituted this imagery with surprising frequency during his career, alluding to archetypal Symbolist dance forms in early works like the *Dream*, as well as in his late televisual play *Quad I + II*. Often described as a dance for four players, *Quad* reveals Beckett's sustained engagement with Symbolist models of performance, which he reinvented to reflect his own experiments with choreographic practice.

Mallarmé...Vico. . Joyce: Towards a Dance of Writing

When tracing the antecedents of Beckett's literary project, critics have not traditionally viewed the Symbolist and Decadent movements as crucial intellectual touchstones. Beckett's affiliations with the Symbolist world-view are not readily transparent, despite Vincent Sherry recently extending the "long legacy of literary decadence" up to Beckett, identifying correlations between the "typical [Decadent] *mise-en-scène*" (285) and a Beckettian preoccupation with the "self-enclosed chamber of writing" (285). Beckett's dramatic texts are littered with unremarkable things – stones, glasses, hats, umbrellas, toothbrushes, pipes, pots – and his attention to the minutiae of the habitual is very different to the fulsome register of much Symbolist prose. Yet his instinct for cataloguing objects precisely, even minor objects of the kind Winnie draws from her handbag in *Happy Days* (1961), places a keen stress on the material world that resonates with the exaggerated taxonomies we find in the work of a Symbolist author like Huysmans. "Many lines of the European imagination meet in Beckett" (241), argues Katharine Worth, and his dramatically distilled vision offers a "mocking, microscopic version" (243) of the archetypal Symbolist theatrical space, a place where the arts can be synthesized and combined.

Beckett's fascination with the perceptual capabilities of the human body can also be read back through Symbolist meditations on sensory experience and spectatorship. For Mallarmé, an aesthetic appreciation of movement was central to the Symbolist project, and the art of dance offered a vital demonstration of corporeal movement as a form of writing. In his seminal essay on the "Ballets" (1886), Mallarmé celebrated the ballerina Elena Cornalba as the embodiment of a sublimely realised aesthetic:

[T]he dancer is not a woman dancing, for these juxtaposed reasons: that she is not a woman, but a metaphor summing up one of the elementary aspects of our form: knife, goblet, flower, etc., and that she is not dancing, but suggesting, through the miracle of bends and leaps, a kind of corporeal writing, what it would take pages of prose, dialogue, and description to express, if it were transcribed: a poem independent of any scribal apparatus.

(130)

For Mallarmé, the dancer's punctuated movements work like an inscription, tracing the course of the body through space in a manner analogous to language. With reference to this passage, Jones has argued that Mallarmé “shifts the aesthetics of dance away from a tradition of literal representation, instead emphasizing the creative input of the dancer who ‘suggests’ form as she moves” (15). Mallarmé certainly wrestles with the question of the dancer's creative authorship in this essay, later eclipsing it entirely: he describes the dancing figure as an “unlettered ballerina” (134), and asserts, in an opaque series of metaphors, that “she hastily delivers up, through the ultimate veil that always remains, the nudity of your concepts, and writes your vision silently like a sign, which she is” (134). The dancer, for Mallarmé, works as an “unconscious” mirror for the creative vision of the poet-spectator, returning his “concepts” (134) through her performance and offering a vision of grace that can be subtly re-inscribed according to the symbolic impulses of the poet.

Mallarmé's thinking on dance underwent critical shifts, and after he saw Loïe Fuller perform her serpentine dance at the Folies Bergère in 1893, he declared her “la forme théâtrale de poésie par excellence” [the superlative theatrical form of poetry] (207), believing her capable of an embodied lyricism that the written word struggled to match. Fuller disregarded the rigor and rehearsed precision of classical ballet, favoring a freer register of movement that incorporated large diaphanous veils illuminated by colored stage lights into her performance. In Mallarmé's account, Fuller is described as a “dazzling illuminate” (136), whose amorphous silks both “clear” and “instate” the stage, reconfiguring traditional modes of performance and spectatorship to create an art that is “all” movement and “pure” expression (136-137). Yet at the center of her dance, where her body should be, emerges only “a central nothingness, all volition” (137).

This charge of a “central nothingness” has also been levelled at the Symbolist movement itself, with Mary Lydon suggesting that “at the heart of symbolism [...] we repeatedly encounter a vacuum, or more accurately an evacuated space, a space from which there has been a withdrawal, which that withdrawal has created” (160). Mallarmé's fixation with the notion of nothingness – a preoccupation Beckett shared – found its greatest fulfilment in Fuller's choreographies, manifestations of continuous movement engineered by a body on the verge of disappearance. While Mallarmé does attempt to account for Fuller's position as the author of the dance, his writing undermines her corporeal will, figuring her dancing body as a blank center beneath the colored veils. With this creator imagined in terms of her absence, the poet assumes the position of a powerful reader, deciphering the dance through the language of his own aesthetic creed.

Beckett would have been familiar with Mallarmé's essays on dance: he owned a copy of the *Oeuvres complètes*, in which they appear, and translated another of Mallarmé's *Divagations* on “Edouard Manet” for his friend Georges Duthuit (Van Hulle and Nixon 63).¹ He also wrote to Thomas MacGreevy in 1932 to tell him he was reading Mallarmé's work again, although some of the texts were causing him trouble: “I was trying to like Mallarmé again the other day, & couldn't,” he wrote, “because it's Jesuitical poetry, even the Swan and Herodiade” (1: 134). The “Herodiade” Beckett mentions was Mallarmé's effort to render the narrative of the biblical dancer Salome (also referred to as Herodiade) in poetic form, an attempt that commenced in 1864 and culminated in the incomplete dramatic fragment that would frustrate a young Beckett many years later. Beyond *Hérodiade*, Salome's dance – obliquely recalled in the Gospel accounts

of St John the Baptist's death – was depicted in numerous Symbolist works, including Huysmans' *À rebours* and Gustave Flaubert's *Trois Contes* (*Three Tales*, 1877), although it was left to Oscar Wilde to transfer this dance to the stage in his controversial Symbolist play *Salomé* (1893). Inseparable from the dance of the seven veils she performed to secure the Baptist's beheading, Salome became a critical shorthand for the widespread choreographic fixations that transformed the output of the Symbolist movement, and we will later trace Beckett's reading of these sources in the allusions to Salome that appear in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and later texts like *Not I* (1972).

Despite the doubt he expressed to MacGreevy, the selections Beckett made in his translation work reveal his sustained engagement with nineteenth-century visions of Salome's dance, and an appetite for revisiting them in his own writing across languages. Beckett's little-known translation of Duthuit's essay "Vuillard and the Poets of Decadence," published in a 1952 issue of the American journal *ART News*, suggestively compares Édouard Vuillard's Symbolist paintings to the "esoteric reek of decay" suffusing the Salome-themed works of Mallarmé and the painter Gustave Moreau (29).² In his translation of Duthuit's essay, Beckett details at length the "sterility" of the Symbolist vision, identifying the "cold, untouchable" (31) figure of Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* as the inspiration for Moreau's *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* (1876), in which "sadistic" womanhood is "hypostasized as the divinity of all the malignant forces of nature" (62). Drawing links between these representations of the biblical dancer and Symbolism's commitment to "the notion of a supreme and ineffable Ideal" (62), this essay sketches out a vital relationship between Salome's veiled dance and Symbolist aesthetics, showing that Beckett, through Duthuit, was ruminating on the central concerns of Mallarmé's choreographic predilections in his own translation work. Mallarmé, Moreau, and their Symbolist contemporaries understood dance to be a uniquely expressive language that offered a blueprint for a larger aesthetic project, and although Beckett would likely have been skeptical of their metaphysical conceptions of Salome's veiled body, he too would come to see it as a valuable counterpart to the permutations of the written word.

As this translation indicates, Beckett was interested in the body's capacity to do the work of language, an idea that appears across his criticism. In "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce," Beckett reads the difficult rhythmical style of Joyce's *Work in Progress* (published as *Finnegans Wake* in 1939) in choreographic terms. In this early essay, Beckett applies Giambattista Vico's theory of poetry as a form originating in the myths and sacred symbols of prehistory to the complex modernist idiom of the *Work in Progress*, describing these structures in Joyce's text as "endless substantial variations of these three beats, and interior intertwining of these three themes into a decoration of arabesques – decoration and more decoration" (22). Denoted in rhythmic terms as "beats," the architecture of the *Work in Progress*, Beckett suggests, corresponds to Vico's three ages of human development – Theocratic, Heroic and Human – with associated classifications of language: Hieroglyphic, Metaphorical, and Philosophical. These internal textual arrangements created by Joyce unfurl like the interconnected arabesques of Islamic art, or even the vertiginous geometry of a dancer's body holding an arabesque, a key position in classical ballet.

In this way, poetry, as "passion and feeling" and sensory experience, has corporeal resonances distinct from metaphysics. This accords with what Steven Connor terms Beckett's "material imagination": a set of physical and kinetic preoccupations that allowed Beckett to

“place the body in a field of action and reaction” (20), rather than rendering it merely “an object of calculation or contemplation” (20). As Beckett writes of Vico’s philosophy, poetry is not a strictly-defined science or a mirror for philosophical abstraction, but a primitive expression of mental curiosity; a “song” born of a “poverty-stricken vocabulary” (24) before the formal elaboration of language. Echoing Mallarmé, Beckett further observes that in early forms of symbolic language, such as hieroglyphics, “form and content are inseparable” (25). By returning to the modes of musical and pictorial languages, Joyce’s idiolect aspires to the same aesthetic unity achieved by Fuller in her serpentine dance, producing a distinctive vernacular that is not merely textual but corporeal, since, as Beckett points out, “in its first dumb form, language was gesture” (24).

It is ultimately in this critical spirit that Beckett argues the *Work in Progress* can best be understood, and his judgment echoes an expressly Mallarméan axiom: “Here form *is* content, content *is* form. [...] It is to be looked at and listened to. [Joyce’s] writing is not *about* something; it is *that something itself*” (27). Meaning is inseparable from the shape and sense and feel of the author’s words, and it is no surprise that Beckett reaches for choreographic terms to deliver his verdict, declaring: “When the sense is dancing, the words dance” (27). According to Thomas Mansell, Beckett’s essay grants “prose more physicality, more vitality than is generally permitted” (102), reflecting the important status accorded to the body across Beckett’s corpus – even the status accorded to dance specifically.

Beckett’s appraisal of the *Work in Progress* indicates that in Joyce’s drafts he discovered a model for a dance of writing that appealed to him. Joyce’s radical break from conventional language enabled him to probe beneath the surface of words, rediscovering a symbolic language akin to gesture and song, capable of marrying form and expression. The question of what lies beneath language continued to preoccupy Beckett, a concern most famously distilled in his 1937 letter to Axel Kaun: “more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it” (1: 518). By this point, he felt that Joyce’s recent work “had nothing at all to do with such a programme [...] [being] much more a matter of the apotheosis of the word” (1: 518). It was “the whispering of the end-music or of the silence underlying all” (1: 518) that Beckett sought, which came nearer to the rhythmic Logographs of Gertrude Stein. As Tajiri points out, Beckett “always thought of painting and music as literature’s models” (181), and this apparently anti-symbolist letter outlines a conception of language similar to the inter-medial Symbolist approaches of Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud. Indeed, Beckett’s choice of metaphor is telling: the “veil” of a language concealing a central “nothingness” precisely reflects Mallarmé’s reading of Fuller’s choreographies, illustrating the symmetries between Symbolist configurations of dance and Beckett’s own literary project. The key difference, elaborated throughout Beckett’s increasingly abstract work, perhaps lies in his professed desire to tear such veils apart.

“Bovril into Salome”: Beckett, the Joyces, and the *Dream*

The imaginative threads woven in this period leave their traces in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, a novel that formed the basis of Beckett’s short story collection *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934). It is no coincidence that while he was writing about the *Work in Progress* as a text composed of interlocking rhythms and arabesques, Beckett was also developing an important

connection with a woman who knew far more than he did about a dancer's craft. While he was helping Joyce with research for the *Work in Progress* in the late 1920s, Beckett became acquainted with Joyce's daughter Lucia, with whom, James Knowlson surmises in his biography, Beckett shared "a few minutes of awkward preliminary small talk" (98) each afternoon before escaping to assist her father. Beckett's relationships with Lucia Joyce and with his cousin Peggy Sinclair (also a dancer, trained at Dalcroze's Schule Hellerau-Laxenburg) exposed him to modern theories of dance and physical education, although these often surface in his early prose in troubling ways, probing at the boundaries between his personal and aesthetic preoccupations.

An accomplished dancer, Lucia Joyce was trained in Paris by Raymond Duncan, whose teachings were based on a Dionysian philosophy of physical freedom and sublimity that was both physically and socially transformative. Through Raymond, Lucia Joyce encountered his sister Isadora Duncan, a former pupil of Fuller who had beguiled the dancing world with her bare-foot, Greek-inspired performances, in which she appeared to move spontaneously and with deep spiritual purpose, "trading formal artistic unity and learned steps for a more natural grace" (Shloss 118). Duncan's dance philosophy, according to Carrie Preston, combined an "antimodern spiritualism" with performances so "fluid and continuous" that they seemed to be created by "a body propelled by a motor" (*Modernism's Mythic Pose* 188; 190). Enthralled by the pedagogy of the Duncan siblings, Lucia Joyce was thoroughly immersed in the novel grammar of modern dance: a vocabulary of movement that posited the body as both a source of natural grace and a powerfully modern tool, connected to the theories of acting that were so influential for Beckett and his contemporaries. While a young Beckett was immersing himself in the strange, fantastic rhythms of early drafts of the *Wake*, he was also interacting regularly with a dancer of precocious talent, who was herself fully absorbed in Europe's newest dance forms.

Both Peggy Sinclair and Lucia Joyce appear in barely veiled form throughout the *Dream* as their ciphers the Smeraldina-Rima and the Syra-Cusa: unflattering parodies that left the Sinclairs in particular quite distraught, following their daughter's early death from tuberculosis in 1933. Whereas Mallarmé imagined Fuller's body to be an invisible force beneath the object of her art, the bodies of Beckett's dancers become sources of both corporeal and linguistic excess in the *Dream*. Peggy Sinclair, whose physical education program Beckett witnessed when he visited her in Laxenburg, is fully embodied and disconcertingly proximate, consistently rendered in metaphors of feminine softness and surplus. The Smeraldina-Rima appears: "knock-knees, ankles all fat nodules, wobbly, mammosse, slobbery-blubberty, bubbub-bubbub, a real button-bursting Weib, ripe" (15). In such descriptions, language collapses into senselessness, producing an unstructured body that is all flesh and no thought. The Smeraldina's efforts to fashion her own bodily aesthetic through choreographic discipline at "the very vanguardful Schule Dunkelbrau" (13) – a wry reinvention of Dalcroze's school at Laxenburg – are ridiculed and ultimately overwritten as Belacqua surveys her "Botticelli thighs" (15), imagining them to be the impression of an Old Master rather than the result of careful self-cultivation.

Beckett's inability to accommodate the female body as a source of creative energy and purpose, rather than of bovine surfeit, is apparent at such moments, which occur often in this early novel. "Whether paragon or parody," Susan Brienza argues, "woman [in the early fiction] is limited to the body and to the emotions" (91). As the Syra-Cusa, Lucia Joyce is differently construed in marmorean metaphors, likened to Constantin Brancusi's abstract *Golden Bird*

sculpture, though she too is ungenerously imagined in terms of a corporeality without intellect: “her neck was scraggy and her head was null” (33). While dance provided Beckett with a valuable model for the dynamic, rhythmically cogent prose style achieved by Joyce in his *Work in Progress*, dancers themselves – their physicality often disturbingly mocked in his early fiction – were not yet accorded the creative integrity that Mallarmé had attempted to recognize in his *Divagations*.

There are moments in the *Dream*, however, when Beckett’s interest in Symbolist models of dance and his own attentiveness to its distinctly sensual, corporeal elements appear to coalesce. One such instance occurs when Beckett’s protagonist Belacqua comes across the sight of Dublin’s famous illuminated Bovril sign on the corner of College Green. This was a spectacle that horrified Yeats, who decried the “discordant architecture” of O’Connell Street; “all those electric signs where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form” (526). Yet for Beckett, the technological object is not so much discordant as rhythmically unremitting, reactivating the specters of earlier myths and textual traces:

Bright and cheery above the strom of the College Green, as though coached by the star of Bethlehem, the Bovril sign danced and danced through its seven phases.

The lemon of faith jaundiced, announcing the series, was in a fungus of hopeless green reduced to shingles and abolished. Next, in reverence for the slain, the light went out. A sly ooze of gules, carmine of solicitation, lifting the skirts of green that the prophecy might be fulfilled, shocking Gabriel into cherry, annexed the sign. But the long skirts rattled down, darkness covered their shame, the cycle was at an end. Da Capo.

Bovril into Salome, thought Belacqua, and Tommy Moore there with his head on his shoulders.

(200)

Beckett’s adoption of major Symbolist tropes in this passage is striking: he may have had Rimbaud’s synaesthetic sonnet “Voyelles” (“Vowels,” 1883) in mind as a model for the sign’s symphony of colors, which revels in sensory confusion, “jaundiced” and “ooz[ing]” like a sickly human body.³ Other critics, including Kelly Anspaugh, have explored the rich intertextuality of this section, picking up on the allusions to the three Irish graces of Joyce’s “The Dead” (1914), as well as Dante’s *Purgatorio* XXIX, a text that allegorizes the Virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love as three dancing women (19-25). However, it is the Salome metaphor in the final line that reveals Beckett’s interest in repurposing the literary and choreographic motifs of his aestheticist precursors, a move confirmed by the “seven phases” of the sign’s choreography: a clear nod to the dance of the seven veils coined by Wilde in his *Salomé*.

Composed at the time he was re-reading Mallarmé’s *Hérodiade*, this passage suggests that Beckett was intrigued by the veiled Salome who danced so conspicuously at the center of late nineteenth-century visual culture, even if this was an image he appropriated for the sake of parody. Noting Belacqua’s attention to the sensual properties of color in this passage, we might recall Huysmans’ appraisal of Moreau’s *L’Apparition* (1876) in *À rebours*: his protagonist Des Esseintes, standing before the painting, admires the “incandescent contours of the body of the

woman [Salome]; catching her at the neck, the legs, the arms, with sparks of fire, bright red like glowing coals, violet like jets of vapour, blue like flaming alcohol, white like starlight” (48). Displacing these properties from Moreau’s watercolor to a lurid advertising display, Beckett subtly mocks the ornate sensuality of the aesthete’s idiom: a drunken Belacqua, entranced by the Bovril sign, undergoes a synaesthetic delirium comparable to Des Esseintes’ hypnosis before a Symbolist artwork.

While Beckett is certainly attentive to the loftier European antecedents of his Salomean metaphor, he deftly shifts this trope into a local setting, allowing it to take on resonances specific to a wet night in 1930s Dublin.⁴ After performing Salome’s game of exposure and concealment, the Bovril sign begins again, conducted by Beckett’s musical instruction: “Da Capo.” The literal translation of this term (“from the head”) not only implies the dance’s reiteration, but gestures towards the unstable “head” severed from the body of the Baptist, the second motif in the biblical narrative. Again, there is a mischievous subtext in play: the nearby statue of the Irish poet Thomas Moore, Beckett’s John the Baptist figure, may have “his head on his shoulders” for the time being, but the statue had been decapitated when it was placed on its pedestal in 1857. It is therefore little surprise that its “droll” (151) appearance became an object of mockery for Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), another Joyce text that strongly influenced Beckett’s early writing.

As a novel that alludes to the work of Joyce above any of Beckett’s contemporaries, the *Dream* reveals Beckett recalibrating his Symbolist influences in concert with the work of his Irish modernist peers. In this respect, he was mirroring Joyce, who similarly imports the tale of Salome and St. John the Baptist into a quotidian setting in *A Portrait*, when Dedalus sardonically compares the elderly parents of his friend Cranly to “the exhausted loins [...] of Elisabeth and Zachary” (209), the aged parents of the Baptist. When he thinks of Cranly, Dedalus sees “always a stern severed head or deathmask as if outlined on a grey curtain or veronica. [...] What do I see? A decollated precursor trying to pick the lock” (209).⁵ Attempting to visualize Cranly, Dedalus is never able to “raise before his mind the entire image of his body but only the image of the head and face” (149). The slippage between the pronoun and the definite article, from “his body” to “the head,” marks a subtle change in property: the severed head, for Joyce, is a body part dispossessed.

Joyce’s complex distilling of the religious sources into a satirical recurring trope – of Cranly’s “deathmask” – reflects the bleak humor Beckett himself favored in his images of bodily severance, which became increasingly central to the visual register of his drama. Such figures haunt Beckett’s stage, and those detached faces imagined by Joyce return in the partial bodies of works like *Play* (1964) and *That Time* (1975), forms “shadowed by remembered or imagined incarnations” (3), according to Anna McMullan. The lone face situated “10 feet above stage level” (CDW 388) in *That Time*, luminous and pale against the black set, gleams uncannily like the Baptist’s incandescent head in Moreau’s *Apparition*. In this resolutely static play, the choreographic movements of an absent Salome are perhaps suggested by the disembodied voices, rhythmically “modulat[ing] back and forth without any break in the general flow except where silence indicated” (388). By following these allusions to Salome and her capital prize, it becomes clear how the symbolic vernacular of much late nineteenth-century art is reactivated in both Joycean and Beckettian contexts, playfully set to the rhythms of technological synaesthesia in the *Dream*, and later finding new forms in Beckett’s work for the theatre. When

it came to the question of integrating choreographic elements into his dramatic texts, Beckett would look again to Symbolist precursors.

“An alluring monotony”: Yeats, Maeterlinck, and *Quad I + II*

From the deliberate pacing at the heart of *Footfalls* (1976) to the patterns of knocking in *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), Beckett experimented with dance-like movement in his plays, frequently organizing individual texts around one key kinetic element or gesture. Worth notes that even a “static” play like *Happy Days* is “almost a dance play; through the rhythm, music, the words of a song we arrive, in Yeatsian mode, at a revelation of a profound deep of the mind” (258). Beckett’s concern with rhythm, revealed in his intensely repetitive, musical texts, can be read back through Symbolist meditations on spiritual and aesthetic meaning. Yeats’s conception of poetic rhythm in “The Symbolism of Poetry” resonates particularly in this respect:

The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols.

(159)

Such an extended state of hypnotized contemplation, familiar to readers of Yeats’s poetry and experimental plays, also mirrors the kinetic structures favored by Beckett in his directorial work. It is possible to map such interlocked patterns of movement, sound, and utterance across Beckett’s corpus, which can be traced back to the precise gestures and spare declamations of Symbolist drama, from Maeterlinck’s “static theatre” to the later dance-dramas of Yeats. Indeed, Yeats provided Beckett with an intriguing model for choreographic performance on the modernist stage, enfolding the elder author’s own Symbolist debts into texts laden with nostalgia for national myths and older traditions including the Japanese Noh theatre.

As he did with Mallarmé, another of the “old chestnuts” (Knowlson 653), Beckett returned to Yeats’s work at various points throughout his life, and he particularly admired *At the Hawk’s Well*, a dramatic adaptation of the Cuchulain legend that Beckett saw at the Abbey Theatre in the early 1930s (Worth 242). In *At the Hawk’s Well*, originally choreographed by the dancer Michio Ito, Yeats responds to the veneration of dance he found in Ezra Pound’s Noh translations while subtly reinventing Salome’s dance for his Irish mythical setting, refracting her veiled movements through the ghostly presence of the *Sidhe*. These spectral figures are not merely phantoms but also dancers; “holy shades / That dance upon the desolate mountain” (213). For Yeats, the *Sidhe* were always affiliated with Salome, and he believed them to move “in dust storms & in all whirling winds,” claiming in a letter to Nancy Maude that “in the middle ages it was said to be the dance of the daughters of Herodias” (CL 701). Placing dance at the centre of his larger ambitions for Irish theatre, Yeats repurposes well-worn Symbolist tropes in *At the Hawk’s Well* to suit the avant-garde forms of his own dramatic project.

Along with its oblique incarnation of the Symbolist muse, *At the Hawk’s Well* offered Beckett an intriguing framework for the depersonalization of the actor, since Yeats insisted that his

performers, including Ito, moved in a fashion that “suggest[ed] a marionette” (166). Developing Knowlson’s claim that Beckett became interested in the concept of a puppet-actor through his reading of Heinrich von Kleist’s *On the Marionette Theatre* (1810), Josephine Starte has illustrated the connections Beckett perceived between marionette movements and dance, which share “an engrained interest in the lines of the body and lines of focus” (186). The idea of dance strongly appealed to Beckett as a model for the relationship between director and performer, which he believed would necessitate a degree of submission that was similar, in Preston’s opinion, to the “exacting choreographic work” (226) Yeats requested. While in evidence across his drama, Beckett’s experimentation with mechanical and automatic behaviors perhaps reaches an apotheosis in the dialogue-free *Quad*, a play that requires its actors to perform with the precision Yeats desired of his marionette-like dancers.

Originally conceived for television, *Quad* involves four hooded players pacing a square area along their own “particular course” (451), moving along the peripheries and towards the centre, a “danger zone” (453) from which they all sharply deviate. Around this quincunx, they walk alone and in combinations: once the first player has completed his or her circuit, the next player joins and does the same, and so on. Beckett composed the piece for the Stuttgart Preparatory Ballet School and stipulated in his directions that at least “some ballet training [was] desirable” (453). *Quad*’s players, their faces hidden by cowls, were to be “as alike in build as possible” (453), though their “sex” was “indifferent” (453), rendering the body itself a point of physical indeterminacy. Each player enters and exits at a different point, walking along his or her own course and, according to the published text, they are clothed in different-coloured gowns – white, yellow, blue, and red – and illuminated by a tinted light. Such coloured intermingling of material and light, structured by the rhythms of this grave quartet, recalls the luminous choreographies of the Bovril sign in the *Dream*, moving, in this earlier text, from yellow to green to red. Although the colours associated with the players in *Quad* alter the palette of Belacqua’s electric sign, they show how Beckett’s vision of a veiled dance of light developed and persisted across his work.

The choreographic qualities of this piece have been identified by others, not least by Gilles Deleuze, who describes the play as “close to a ballet” in its “substitution of a ‘gestus’ as a logic of postures and positions for all story or narrative” (13-14). Dance provides a grammar and design for the piece, replacing the complex verbal repetitions we find elsewhere in Beckett’s work. Developing Deleuze’s insights, Jones has compared *Quad* to Oskar Schlemmer’s *Space Dance* (297), echoing Herta Schmid’s claim that *Quad* reflects the Bauhaus theatre productions of the 1920s that adopted Adolphe Appia’s concept of “rhythmic spaces” (286). Referring back to the choreographic formulations of “Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce,” Jones argues that when Beckett praises the *Work in Progress* for its closing of the gap between language and meaning, he “could equally be referring to the choreographed abstraction of his own late drama” (293). Her observation resonates particularly with *Quad*: while the players’ motions differ stylistically to the fluid modulations of the modern dance performances Mallarmé celebrated, this work nonetheless shows Beckett synthesizing form and content through a colored dance of veils, doing away with speech to create a drama of pure movement.

Beckett’s most perfectly reduced dramatic spaces reveal his interest in the body’s capacity to produce its own language: a concise syntax of movement unfettered by the residues of the spoken work. Of course, *Quad* does not quite achieve the radical silence that Beckett had

imagined in his letter to Axel Kaun, since the percussive accompaniment saturates the pacing of the figures with musical textures. Even in *Quad II*, which dispenses with the drums, the dancers' shuffling feet produce the inevitable acoustic traces of bodies meeting ground. Yet, as Mary Bryden explains, "silence [for Beckett] [...] is part of a continuum of sound" (27), and his work reveals "an extended preoccupation with compositional boundaries: between light and dark, audible and inaudible, perceptible and imperceptible — and, above all, between sound and silence" (39). The players in *Quad* require choreographic training not merely so they can properly execute the movements, Deleuze reminds us, but so they can understand "the hiatus, the punctuation, the dissonance" (14). Attempting to harness the mobile precision of the dancer's body, Beckett also discovers the stillness made possible by dance; the paradox T. S. Eliot famously located at "the still point of the turning world" (179) in his poem "Burnt Norton" (1936). Such a conflicted experience can only be understood "during an atemporal moment of refined physical and mental activity" (Jones 224); it is the space Beckett's players confront at the center-point of *Quad*'s quincunx, where the dance, as Eliot might have it, is "Neither from nor towards [...] / [...] neither arrest nor movement" (179), but fleetingly both.

In searching for the stillness as well as the silence underlying language, Beckett was working in a Symbolist vein associated with the performance theories of Yeats and other late nineteenth-century dramatists, including Maeterlinck. As the author of a number of intensely slow and portentous "plays for marionettes," Maeterlinck turned silence into "an active and troubling theatrical force" (Worth 62), corresponding to a minimalist register of motion and gesture. In Maeterlinck's dramatic system, outlined in *The Treasure of the Humble* (1896), only the most essential movements were required; he conceived of his "static theatre" as a theatre without action, akin to the "motionless" tragedies of Aeschylus (107-108). Such a theatre anticipates the choreographic forms of Beckett's stage-world, where the actors execute their movements with a ballet dancer's fastidious intent. Maeterlinck's ideal protagonist, described in his essay "The Tragical in Daily Life," is certainly a familiar figure for readers of Beckett: "an old man, seated in his armchair, waiting patiently, with his lamp beside him; giving unconscious ear to all the eternal laws that reign about his house, interpreting, without comprehending, the silence of doors and windows" (105). This figure seems to uncannily anticipate the aged men (and women) Beckett conjures frequently in his plays, from Hamm "in an armchair on castors, covered with an old sheet" (92) in *Endgame* to *Rockaby*'s (1981) "prematurely old" (433) woman, mechanically rocking in a chair whose "rounded inward curving arms [...] suggest embrace" (433).

As such recurring figures demonstrate, Beckett's visual idiom is characterized by the reiteration and reduction of critical images, and *Quad*'s dancers are also familiar in the context of his own oeuvre. With their "gowns reaching to the ground, [and] cowls hiding [their] faces" (452), they closely resemble the djellaba-clad Auditor of *Not I*, a work that also subtly recalibrates the Salomean myth that fixated the Symbolists. In letters to James Knowlson and Avigdor Arikha, Beckett claimed that he was inspired to write *Not I* after visiting St John's Cathedral in Valletta, where he spent an hour contemplating Caravaggio's *Decollation of St John the Baptist* (Knowlson 588), another adaptation of the Salome narrative. Emilie Morin has suggested that Caravaggio's *Decollation* may have offered Beckett "a formal precedent for his own distribution of zones of light and darkness on stage" (150) with its dramatic illumination of the Baptist's beheading, and the barely lit figures observing from the gloom. A stark and gruesome depiction of the biblical scene, this painting imagines the bleak moment of

decapitation, with an eager Salome readying her platter and a frightened woman (possibly Herodias) by her side. Rather than Salome herself, it is this old woman's "gesture of helpless compassion" (375) that Beckett integrates into the role of the Auditor in *Not I*, with the dance and the decapitation radically condensed into the frantic verbal dance of Mouth, a severed body part. Despite the radical confinement of the actor's body in the role of Mouth (a part performed at the Royal Court by Billie Whitelaw in 1973), the notion of a dance persists in Mouth's intensely rhythmic declamations, which follow an intricate design of pauses, repetitions, screams, and barks of laughter. In her autobiography, Whitelaw described these patterns of speech in inter-medial terms as "the dynamic rhythms of Beckett's word-music" (78), reaching for musical and choreographic lexis to convey the specific qualities of Beckett's language.

Quad's revival of *Not I*'s Auditor suggests that Beckett may have been musing on the imagery of these veiled dancers as early as 1972 but his intentions for the performance clearly evolved at various moments, with the colored gowns taking on specific importance as markers of the play's failing and disintegrating conditions. Beckett experimented with the presentation of the gowns during rehearsals for the German network Süddeutscher Rundfunk and suggested that they might stage the play with the costumes "grey" and in "tatters" (*Letters* 4: 333) rather than the distinct colours initially planned. These modifications show that Beckett was attuned to the shifting interactions between veil and body, with the alterations in the costumes corresponding to the changing capabilities of the bodies of the dancers themselves. This bleaker realization can be traced, for instance, in *Quad II*, which presents the four figures progressing at a greatly-reduced pace, their once brightly colored gowns now merely white. Observing this muted change to the play's aesthetic and kinetic properties, viewers might be reminded of Lucky's net-dance, described by Pozzo as "now [...] the best he can do" (39), though he was once able to perform a whole host of traditional dances "for joy" (39). As Lucky's diminished routine implies, Beckett's dancers continuously edge towards the crisis of an end point, although their choreographies bear the traces of once energetic modes of performance. *Quad*'s monotonous structure and its exhausted second iteration offer austere late modernist revisions of the luminous Symbolist dances Beckett parodied so effectively in the *Dream* and it is in this regard that Beckett's late plays negotiate the legacies of Symbolist dance-writing, while also pursuing a dramatic vision that is resolutely his own.

The Body's own Laws: Performing Beckett from Billie Whitelaw to Lisa Dwan

Through both their aesthetic qualities and underlying formal structures, Beckett's texts solicit choreographic interpretation, and the testimonies of his actors affirm the importance of dance as a model for performing his work. Discussing the rehearsals for *Footfalls* in her autobiography, Whitelaw stresses the importance of rhythm and posture, describing how Beckett "would endlessly move [her] arms and [her] head in a certain way [...] If it didn't feel right he would correct the pose" (144). Although she did not feel "restricted" by his meticulous direction or by her character's intensely repetitive pacing, she did feel that "[her] movements were being choreographed" and that these motions "started to feel like a dance" (144-145). In *Footfalls*, as in *Quad*, rhythm is integral to the symbolic and emotional structure of the drama, conferring meaning through the monotonous cadences of the actor's body.

Delineating the creative process in terms of a dance, Whitelaw's account of rehearsing *Footfalls* testifies to the difficult and intense experience of collaborating choreographically with Beckett. Her body became a malleable stage element, and she recalls feeling as if Beckett were "a sculptor and I a piece of clay" (144). Carefully manipulating his actor's limbs during rehearsals, Beckett assumed the role of a master-puppeteer controlling the body of his performer: as Whitelaw recalls, "When this creature moved, it could only move in a certain predestined way; the body had its own laws" (145). Her grotesque gait reflected Beckett's preference for a marionette style of movement, which we have already traced back to the Symbolist theater of Maeterlinck, for whom the body persisted as "a kind of uncleanable residue in the process of performance" (McGuinness 113). The marionette (or an actor mimicking such behaviors as in Whitelaw's case) could overcome this issue by acting as a depersonalized carrier of the symbol. Yeats sympathized with this position, famously requesting that his actors be placed in barrels so he could "shove them about with a pole when the action required it" (Taxidou 82), and Beckett shared this characteristically Symbolist ambition for painstaking accuracy in performance, although, as Hannah Simpson has argued, he developed this model into a "more nuanced idea of shared creative agency" (415), particularly in his collaborations with Whitelaw.

Despite the somewhat troubling gender dynamic established in this collaboration, it was through the art of obedience that Whitelaw claimed to discover her creative role, which implies that a conventional model of agency – privileging vague conceptions of freedom in movement – does not map neatly on Beckett's works. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writing on pedagogy, Preston argues that learning often occurs in "the middle ranges of agency" (16), and she proposes that the performance of an "impersonal self" (17) might open up new kinds of collaborative work through bodily submission. In dance, this is an idea that underpins the execution of choreographed movement, allowing for the sensation Starte describes as a "freedom achieved through compliance with fastidious instruction" (181). Arguably, Beckett's entire body of work for the theatre engages with such forms of movement: the actor Lisa Dwan has recently said that she "now approach[es] all [Beckett's] work predominantly as a dancer, first allowing all the elements of the poetry to play itself out, the visuals, the rhythmic, the sensor stimulus – this is vast holistic work that simply will not be served from the neck up" (Dwan). Subtly blending the roles of actor and dancer, Dwan is attentive to the corporeal vocabulary permeating Beckett's work on the levels of both dialogue and stage directions, an approach that positions her body as an interpretive instrument at the center of Beckett's dramatic system, rather than a mere vessel.

In its profound conception of a language of movement, Beckett's late theatre can be seen as a radical elaboration of a choreographic model initially theorized by the Symbolists in their prose and works for the stage. Mallarmé's desire to create a new form of dance-like inscription, comparable to Fuller's ingenious bodily writing, was underpinned by a longing for silence and blankness that Beckett also sought to render in his work, though Beckett imagined his project in almost oppositional terms. In the 1937 letter to Kaun, he laments the verbiage of Symbolist art and its appeal for critical elucidation: "For in the forest of symbols that are no symbols, the birds of interpretation, that is no interpretation, are never silent" (1: 519) Beckett's reluctance to have his work read in such symbolic terms is well-known, and the closing line of *Watt* (1953) appears to wryly reiterate his former concern: "no symbols where none intended" (223). In

attempting to fulfil this anti-symbolist vision, however, Beckett managed to reconstitute the “central nothingness” Mallarmé perceived in modern dance; as Albright claims of Beckett’s writing, he sought “to refine the procedures through which a text can reflect its lack of content, the central absence” (13). Such processes are active across Beckett’s work, and they are particularly visible in a dance play like *Quad*, a work that gives physical form to this absence via the danger zone at the center of the stage. This zone is not merely a space of negativity but also one of kinetic regeneration, prompting the dancers to pause, turn and move on. Their rhythmic circumnavigating of this space therefore enacts the pure volition Mallarmé discerned beneath Fuller’s veils, repurposing Symbolism’s model of corporeal writing to create an abstract choreography of mathematical reiterations: a wordless dance that allows bodies to speak.

¹ In a letter to Duthuit (2: 120), Beckett explains that he has opted to translate Mallarmé’s essay “Edouard Manet” instead of “De même,” which he also considered.

² Pilling makes a note of this translation but does not discuss the essay’s contents. See “A Dialogue of a Different Kind.”

³ Joyce used to recite Rimbaud’s “Voyelles” in French to Beckett while they worked together in the late 1920s (Knowlson 686).

⁴ In *More Pricks than Kicks*, this (slightly altered) passage appears in the short story “A Wet Night.”

⁵ Stephen Dedalus confuses St John the Baptist with John the Evangelist, recalling the story of St John before the Latin Gate with this reference to the lock.

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